KEEP CALM AND CARRY ON
December 6, 2009

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Psalm 96
Luke 1: 68–79

"By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to give light to those who sit
in darkness and the shadow of death."
Luke 1: 78–79 (NRSV)

Come, thou long-expected Jesus,
Born to set thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us;
Let us find our rest in thee.

Charles Wesley
"Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus"

Dear God, we love this Advent,
this promise of your coming into history,
your coming into the life of the world and our own lives.
So in this silence, in this darkened and silent place
where we sit together, come to us, speak your word to us,
startle us with your nearness, your presence, your love,
in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Earlier this year, Stuart Manley, a used-book seller in Northumberland, England, was rummaging around in a box of old books. A colorful piece of folded paper at the bottom of the box caught his eye. It was a poster, bright red, with the crown of the King, George VI at the top and bold, bright letters that read:

KEEP CALM
AND
CARRY ON

Manley liked the poster, framed it, and hung it in the window of his bookshop. Looking into the poster's origins, he discovered that it was created in 1939 by the British Ministry of Information, just prior to the Blitz, when German planes flew over Great Britain every night bombing London, Coventry, Liverpool, industrial centers and civilian populations. The world

had never seen anything quite like it: the air raid sirens every night, citizens hiding in basements and subway stations, the unbelievable noise and explosions, fires and destruction, the nightly death toll. British people were understandably terrified. To make matters much, much worse, everyone in the world, including the British government, expected Nazi Germany to invade Great Britain. It may have been the most frightening time in history for the British people. That is when the Ministry of Information created the posters, 2.5 million of them, to be distributed and posted when the German invasion began. The invasion didn't happen. The posters were never distributed. After the war they were destroyed, all but two of them, one of which Stuart Manley found at the bottom of a box of used books. People began to ask about the eye-catching poster in his shop window. So he had it reproduced and so far has sold 40,000 copies.

Manley's wife, Mary, said, "Its message is so simple, so clear, so without spin—'Keep Calm and Carry On' has turned out to have meaning not just for a single people in a time of trouble, but for all of us, wherever we live, whatever our troubles" (*Chicago Tribune* 21 March 2009).

I do not own a copy, but if I did, I would post it on the church bulletin board, because I think the poster's message is particularly appropriate for the Second Sunday of Advent. I do not mean in any way to trivialize the very real destruction and terror and evil of the Blitz and the understandable fear of the British people, but it does occur to me that you and I are under a kind of media and commercial blitz at the moment.

We're under assault. We're busy and getting busier: full-page ads in newspapers and magazines, television commercials, one after the other, tell us that the way to observe this holiday is to spend. From the federal government on down, everybody is fervently hoping and praying not for salvation from on high, but a better bottom line. (This is a perfect time to remind you that you can do a little of it right here this morning at our Fair Trade Christmas Bazaar in Anderson Hall.) Even the Illinois Lottery is into the act, urging us to celebrate Christmas by buying more lottery tickets, and it has stolen our best song, "Joy to the World," as the soundtrack.

In the meantime, the church is asking you to slow down: come sit in the darkness for awhile, ponder nothing earthly minded, wait and watch for something to happen that is quiet and unexpected and rather ordinary, actually—the birth of a child. And the whole thing is introduced not with sound and lights and trumpets and Hallelujah Choruses—that will come later—but with Advent hymns about waiting and watching and a story about an old couple: Elizabeth and Zechariah, who are living in the hill country around Jerusalem, 2,000 years ago.

I like Zechariah a lot. His wife, Elizabeth, and her cousin, Mary, get all the attention, but I can identify with Zechariah. He acts like people I know. I

like him because, as Luke diplomatically puts it, he and his wife are “getting on in years.”

Elizabeth comes from a good family. He’s a priest. He probably maintains a shrine or altar in his village, and once a year he goes to Jerusalem, along with a group of the priests, to serve in the temple. It’s a great honor, and on this occasion he is chosen, by lot, to be the one to enter the Holy of Holies, light incense, and come out and bless the congregation that is gathered for the occasion. It’s the honor of a lifetime. But while he’s in there, something happens: a vision, a mystical experience, an angel. The angel has a command and an announcement. Zechariah is terrified, of course. “Do not be afraid,” the angel commands. “Elizabeth will conceive and bear a son; name him John.” “How in the world is that supposed to happen?” Zechariah says. “We’re both old; we’re beyond that.”

And the angel, who identifies himself by name, Gabriel, says, “I’ve been sent by God to tell you this extraordinarily good news. But because you apparently have an imagination deficit, not to mention a lack of confidence and trust, you’re not going to speak again until the baby is born.”

Now if you’re a religious professional, a preacher, and you can’t talk, you have a big problem here. It’s part of what I love about Zechariah. I’m told that every profession has its own bad dream or nightmare and that practitioners of that profession report that they regularly have the dream or a variation of it. I don’t know what the bad dream is for doctors or accountants, but I know that for ministers it has to do with preaching. You step into the pulpit and your sermon manuscript is gone, or the service is starting and you’re late, or the alarm didn’t go off and you can hear the opening hymn and you’re still in bed, or it’s time for church and you’re in jeans and a T-shirt and can’t find your collar. So Zechariah is the preacher’s worst nightmare. It’s the most important occasion in his life; the most important congregation he will ever address is waiting outside the Holy of Holies for him to emerge and speak and bless—and he can’t talk. He has no voice. It strikes terror in the hearts of every one of us.

And then there’s the matter of God preventing the religious professional from speaking. It’s not laryngitis. It’s God who takes his voice, shuts him up. Kathleen Norris says Zechariah’s muteness was actually a gift of grace, so he couldn’t embarrass himself by talking and making matters worse. A female colleague of mine once suggested to me that the point here is that for nine months a man had to listen to his wife instead of talking and furthermore that when it comes to the topic of pregnancy and reproductive issues, the man’s inability to speak, his God-induced silence, is about right and that male politicians and the clergy who pronounce on the issue with such confidence ought to follow suit and listen and stop talking.

So for nine months he’s unable to speak. This religious professional, who, with his wife, waited for years for a child and had long since given up hope,

now can't do anything but think, ponder, and wonder about this amazing development: Elizabeth's going to have a baby.

When the child is born and they name him John as the angel instructed them to do—he will prepare the way for another unexpected birth, the surprising pregnancy of Elizabeth's cousin, Mary, and her child, Jesus—old Zechariah finds his voice. And the first words out of his mouth are a kind of joyful poem; the birth of a child turns fathers into poets. Whatever he said, Luke arranges it in a canticle, which the church has loved for twenty centuries, the Benedictus:

> Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people.

That's what parents think, even if they don't say it quite like that, about their newborn. It's what I think every time I'm privileged to hold an infant in my arm for baptism. "Blessed be the Lord." Every child is a blessing from God, a sign of God's goodness. Every child is a sign of God's promise.

As new fathers are inclined to do, Zechariah can't resist a little boasting:

> And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High.

And then the most beautiful images I know:

> By the tender mercy of our God
> the dawn from on high will break upon us,
> to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
> to guide our feet into the way of peace.

Suddenly old Zechariah, who has been thinking about this for nine months, takes us from cooing over a new baby into the very depths of our humanity, with profoundly human issues, with those stunning images—sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death, deliverance from the fear of them, fear of the darkness.

The angel's first words to Zechariah and to young Mary—"Do not be afraid"—continue to echo throughout the Bible. Walter Brueggemann says it is the fundamental biblical word: "Fear not." It comes to Moses in the wilderness, to Israel in captivity and about to be liberated but facing a wilderness and an unknown future, to a skeptical old man and a frightened, pregnant teenager, to startled shepherds in the field watching their sheep, to grieving women at an open tomb: "Do not be afraid." To everyone who sits in the darkness and ponders his or her mortality—that's what sitting in the shadow of death means, pondering your own mortality—fear of death, fear of meaninglessness, fear of nothingness:

> Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil, for thou art with me."

It is the great darkness, the shadow over human life, the fear. St. Paul called death the last enemy, our final enemy.

Fear paralyzes. Fear of falling prevents you from climbing high. Fear of failure prevents you from venturing. Fear of rejection prevents you from loving unconditionally. Fear of intimacy prevents you from being vulnerable. Fear of death prevents you from living.

Fear running rampant in a society, psychologist Murray Bowen says, is responsible for terrorism, fundamentalism, and toxic policies (Roger Gench, *Feasting on the Word*, p. 34).

> From our sins and fears release us;
> Let us find our rest in thee

we will sing.

It's the release that is important. To believe in God, to trust in Jesus Christ, is not to have no fears at all; it is to be released from them, not to be captive to them, not to live out of your fears whatever they are—fear of failure, rejection, or fear of the final enemy, death itself. It is to live in the freedom of knowing that in the birth of Jesus Christ, ultimate issues have been resolved. God's love has come and will come into our world and into our lives. God's love will surround us and keep us every day of our lives right up to the last one and beyond. God's love shines in every darkness, every shadow.

A good friend of mine, Mark Ramsey, pastor of Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church in Asheville, North Carolina, in a fine sermon reminded me of a story Anne Lamott tells in her first best-seller, *Operating Instructions,* about parenting a first child. Anne had taken her two-year-old son to Lake Tahoe, where they stayed in a condominium by the lake. There are a lot of gambling establishments, so all the rooms come with light-blocking blinds so you can gamble all night and sleep all day.

One day Anne put her baby to sleep in his Pack 'n Play in a totally darkened bedroom and went to work writing in the next room. A few moments later she heard her baby knocking on the door from inside. She got up to put him back to bed and then—every parent's nightmare—found the door locked.

Somehow he had managed to push the lock button on the doorknob. He was calling, "Mommy, Mommy," and she was saying, "Just jiggle the doorknob, honey, push the button again." Of course, he couldn't even see the doorknob in the darkened room. When it became clear to him that his mother couldn't open the door, panic set in. She could hear him sobbing.

His mother did everything she could think of: trying the door; calling the rental agency, the manager; leaving frantic messages on answering machines; running back to comfort her son there in the dark, locked room, terrified.

Finally she did the only thing she could think of, which was to lie down and slide her fingers under the door where there were a few centimeters of space. She told him over and over to do the same: to bend over and find her fingers. And somehow he did and he quieted down.

They stayed like that for what seemed like a long time, until help came, him holding her fingers in the dark, feeling her presence, her care, her love. (Thanks to Mark Ramsey for this story, which he quotes in "Belonging," *Journal for Preachers*, Advent 2009.)

Sometimes you and I are like that two-year-old in the dark, and God always is like that mother, present in the darkness.

Christmas is the promise that God is faithful; it is the good news that God does not forget us, abandon us, ever, and therefore, finally, there is nothing to fear.

> "Keep Calm and Carry On."
>
> By the tender mercy of our God
> the dawn from on high will break upon us,
> to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
> to guide our feet into the way of peace.

Amen.